
ABROAD

PRETORIA

Guessing and Fearing

The national elections announced for early May in South Africa by President P. W. Botha are expected to decide two things, according to diplomatic observers here: what the dominant Afrikaners think about the moral and economic sanctions imposed on their country by the Western community, and whether there can be an opposition within the Boer nation to the National Party. Western pressure on the South African economy has so far amounted to little more than public relations. The divestiture by big American corporations of their local holdings has often only strengthened the power of their South African equivalents, who were able to buy up American investments cheap. The threat of an Afrikaner split is more immediate and could have a far greater effect. In the past, the Afrikaners were rurally based people who worked the land and ran the government, but were not part of the business or financial structure. But now, an urbanized class has come into existence that seeks high corporate rank and salary. These "modern" Afrikaners fear that the 71-year-old backward-looking Botha is not the man to preside over the economic and developmental struggles that face their country. The resignation of the South African ambassador in London, Denis Worrall, crystallized these issues. Worrall, an English-descended South African who has been on the anvil as his country's spokesman in London, is sympathetic with the younger liberals at home. Though it may well be too early for him to run in the May elections, his resignation already makes him a political figure.

PRAGUE

Not-So-Silent Spring

Members of the Charter 77 group celebrated its tenth anniversary recently by issuing an appeal to their fellow countrymen to overcome apathy and fear and denounce "the disorder in production, public service, and domestic commerce, and the paralysis of bureaucracy." Charter 77 also wants the regime to grant amnesties to political prisoners, notably to the members of the so-called Jazz Section, so that Czechoslovakia will not appear to be "the Brezhnevian fossil" of the socialist camp. Charter 77 has nothing like the power of Solidarity in Poland, composed as it is largely of intellectuals, academics, and officials of former regimes. But diplomatic observers in Prague point out that the Czechs and the Slovaks display a pattern of historic behavior that alternates long periods of seeming passivity with violent and effective upheavals in the name of national independence. The Prague spring of 1968 may be in for a reprise.

HANOI

L'Indochine

It was just forty years ago that the most convulsive and far-reaching colonial war of modern times had its bloody beginnings in the uprising of Communist-led Vietnamese against their French rulers. For days and weeks, the placid streets of the French colonial city were filled with smoke and fire as the French army slowly regained possession of

Hanoi. The worst fighting took place at the citadel, the airfield, and the Paul Doumer Bridge, the "iron dragon" that crossed the Red River to the strategic suburb of Gialam. Ho Chi Minh, the rebel leader, had already concluded an uneasy pact with France on the heels of the departure of Japanese and Chinese occupation troops, under which Vietnam was to be an autonomous republic within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. But misunderstandings and bad temper scotched what was probably an unworkable treaty. Thus began a war that was to last eight years and cost eighty thousand French lives until the humiliating and final French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954.

AVIGNON

Under Two Flags

There has been a marked increase of British soldiers of fortune, according to records at the headquarters of the Foreign Legion, now based in the southern French town of Aubagne near here. Observers say that former British officers and conscripts have been signing up for the legion ever since the end of the Falkland War four years ago. A very high 10 per cent of legion strength is now furnished by Englishmen, more than twice the normal complement.

VENICE

Giant Mice

An upsurge in the rat population of Venice this winter has left canals and palaces infested with a particularly large species of water rat, called "giant mice" in the Venetian dialect. These animals are said to be the terror of cats and so intelligent that they recognize every kind of poison and trap. The rats get into houses through open sewers and drains, crawling up through bathtubs and toilets and entering kitchens and bedrooms where they make themselves at home. Their propensity for biting humans makes them even more feared. The city engineering department has devised a plan to use special powders to trace the rats' hideaway paths, and to study their feeding and foraging habits. A large map of rat runways and dens is being set up for a long war—now estimated to last two years.



"And if you would permit me to pontificate for a moment . . ."

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